

NBC NIGHTLY NEWS  
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NICARAGUA/  
ISRAELI AID

BROKAW: Congress returns to work after their Easter recess tomorrow, and one of the major pieces of unfinished business involves military aid to Central America. The Reagan administration wants \$21 million in covert aid for the rebels fighting the Nicaraguan government and nearly \$62 million in additional military aid for the El Salvador government. In this Special Segment report by Fred Francis tonight, we learn that those American-backed rebels fighting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua are getting lots of weapons from one of America's closest allies, Israel. As Francis reports, however, it's a dangerous business all the way around.

FRANCIS: Soviet machine guns are now used by American-backed rebels in the war for Nicaragua. NBC News has learned that the state of Israel, at Washington's urging, has armed a quarter of the rebel army. The rebels want Soviet weapons because they can capture ammunition from the Soviet-supplied Nicaraguan enemy. Rebel commander \*Enrique Bermudas. ENRIQUE BERMUDAS: We receive some weapons from, uh, the weapon from the, that Israeli government took from the PLO in Lebanon.

FRANCIS: Israel's Ariel Sharon, after two trips to Honduras, offered the spoils of the 1982 Lebanese invasion to the so-called covert war. The rebels store the weapons and ammunition here at this clandestine airfield. We are not permitted to tell you where we are, but it is from this field that that 47-year-old cargo plane supplied by Washington flies its airdrop missions deep into Nicaragua. Crates of guns are inventoried by the CIA. (scene of men organizing large boxes) The agency must approve every airdrop into Nicaragua, every one. Rebels complain they don't get enough to arm all their volunteers, so they can only harass, not topple the regime in Managua. Administration officials admit they keep the rebels on a tight leash. As a result, for instance, this is the only cargo plane they're allowed to have. CIA agents control this American-built airstrip, and several administration sources say those agents get their orders from a special planning group at the White House. That's who controls this supply line to Nicaragua's rebels. It is a dangerous supply route. The C-47 is very slow. Two others have gone down. Four men and a door gunner protect it with automatic weapons. The drop zone is 110 miles from Managua. Commander Bermudas says 64 peasants are waiting for guns. The rebel camp is sighted. The plane groans in a tight circle below 1,000 feet. The men await a signal. (a bell rings and men push bundles out of airplane) The 64 volunteers stand fast in an L-shaped formation for

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orders to uncrate 64 rifles, 22,000 bullets and a medical kit. Again, this 110 miles from Managua. In the main rebel war room outside of the Honduran capital, no set-piece battles are planned, just

the plottings of troop movements and the tactics of hit and run. Bermudas offers a frustrated laugh at the White House policy which won't allow him to win. (to Bermudas) And it's not working, is it? BERMUDAS (laughing): No working. There is a, a conflict in an open war and the covert support.

FRANCIS: The rebels' covert support could soon end. Many congressmen now believe the president's policy here is confusing and immoral, so 13,000 rebels could be abandoned, forced to turn again to Israel and others to save themselves from becoming refugees in a war lost in a divided Washington. Fred Francis, NBC News, Honduras.

BROKAW: In Tel Aviv, the Israeli defense ministry, when asked about this whole arrangement, said, 'We don't comment on arms sales.'